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BOOK REVIEWS

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"Today, I dream of young historians who dream of writing like Foucault", writes Paul Veyne – though he is scarcely a young historian himself, being an Emeritus Professor of Roman History at the Collège de France (p. 25). This dream, however, has already come true, since nearly three decades after Michel Foucault's death in 1984, his inspiration lives on. Very likely, countless historians dream of writing like Foucault, now that his books have in many places become part of basic study, and – this notwithstanding – still manage to electrify independent circles of readers and evening discussions around the kitchen table.

Foucault is a point of reference for different and even contradictory positions, both scholarly and politically. From someone like François Ewald, Foucault's one-time collaborator, subsequently an adviser to the employers' association MEDEF, to left-wing militants, everyone designs their own Foucault. This is less a matter of readings, appropriations, or false conclusions, than a result of Foucault's own genealogical procedure, which consistently avoided conclusive results – a method open to use. And against his own rejection of an emphatic concept of author, this "slender, elegant and decisive person" continues to exert an attraction (p. 3). Paul Veyne was a close friend of the philosopher from student days, and this book of personal remembrances attests both to the fascination of Foucault's work and to its kaleidoscopic quality. This is then a story in Foucauldian vein, but even more so it is Veyne's particular Foucault.

Veyne's argument tallies with that of an earlier essay (*Foucault révolutionne l'histoire*, Paris, 1978), though he focuses here more strongly on the person. The result is not a biography, but rather a portrait of the thinker and his thought that is in formal terms quite traditional. According to him, Foucault was the complete historian, representative of an "empirical kind of anthropology" based on "historical critique" (p. 2). Veyne thereby declares Foucault to be a scientist who pursued the historicity of truth in meticulously positivist fashion. He develops this core idea in the first half of the book more circuitously than rigorously.

The first five chapters cover Veynes's particular reading of Foucault's concept of discourse, his insistence on unconditioned historicity, and his scepticism. Archaeology accordingly appears as a way of bringing to light unintentional change that does not have a unique foundation. Veyne takes the example of his own work on the beginnings of Christianity (here he appeals not to Foucault, but to a source that may surprise the inexperienced reader – Joseph Ratzinger; see p. 63, note 8). Veyne indicates how a universalism that marks thinking in universals through to today first arose in the world with the new religion, with changing contours and adaptations. He concludes: "Origins are seldom beautiful; realities and truths develop through epigenesis; they are not pre-formed in any seed" (p. 64).

Truths, in Veyne's underlying argument, are not separable from the procedures of their production. To this extent, it is not superordinate principles that are to be studied, but rather concrete practices. Foucault's starting point here was his idea of discourse. To bring

to light a discourse means describing a historical formation in its particular difference. The variations of this difference form a history of truth, since these truths do not exist beyond the practices in which they arise. Discourses, accordingly, are not ideologies or infrastructures, neither – according to Veyne – are they primarily linguistically structured systems of statements. Instead, Veyne repeatedly uses the metaphor of a "fishbowl" in which a certain thinking and acting remain confined (pp. 2, 13ff., 27, 74). The philosopher investigates the boundaries of such a "fishbowl", but as a person acting, he likewise moves within an aquarium.

The metaphor is attractive, but problematic, since, as he proceeds, Veyne seems to meld together distinct concepts from different stages in Foucault's work such as episteme, discourse, and *dispositif* (the latter translated quite objectively, but convincingly, as "set-up", instead of "apparatus" or "arrangement" as is widespread in English). But Veyne is not concerned with distinctions of terminology, rather with the development of a basic argument, that "in human affairs, there are and can only be transient singularities […] since, in its becoming, humanity lacks any foundation, vocation or dialectic to set it in order: every period presents nothing but a chaos of arbitrary singularities, the products of the chaotic concatenation of the preceding period" (p. 51).

The rejection of a single transhistorical truth leads to an all the stronger attention to particular truths. Veyne defends Foucault as a digger in the archives who has burrowed deep in primary source material, rapidly finding an orientation on new research terrain and always placing high value on individual facts. The truth of details allows "no prime mover behind historical causality", such as economy or society (p. 55). "Society" in this perspective is not the explanation, but rather that which an investigation has to explain. This is why for a long while Foucault did not arouse much interest among social historians – something that, according to Veyne, greatly disappointed him – since these conceived "society" as a self-evident frame of reference (pp. 22ff.).

Veyne takes great pains to show that Foucault pursued a project of empirical truths that was both modest and rigorous, having nothing in common with relativism. Relativism seeks to demonstrate how the same object develops over time, or in different societies, a different evidence. But Foucault does not assume an object preconceived in advance, does not place himself at an Archimedean point that can differentiate relativities. "Pleasures" in antiquity, "flesh" in the Middle Ages, "sexuality" in modern times, are not different names, but rather each a distinct object. To put it a different way, relativism paradoxically has to relate truths to a totality, whereas Foucault is unburdened by totality and can therefore insist on empirical scientificity (p. 86).

Veyne's Foucault is at bottom a Nietzschean, still more so than Foucault confessed himself to be (if indeed this is possible). In a typically – for him – commanding tone, Veyne states: "In short, Foucault's entire *oeuvre* is a continuation of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*" (p. 110). Veyne is so sure of this, that he occasionally chides his hero for having made the point insufficiently clear, for example by having written his book on method, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "too early and too hastily" (p. 84). To confine Foucault within such a narrow bracket is strangely ahistorical.

"Foucault" appears in this presentation as a cipher for Veyne's own programme. This is certainly one-sided, but stimulating, as this programme could also offer a corrective to a domesticated practice of analysis such as is sometimes prevalent. Veyne's idea of discourse as a dissection of singularities runs counter to many applications of discourse analysis in historiography. These frequently emphasize the regularity of a system of statements, and erect discourses into coherent bodies of text. Despite all assertions to the contrary, such

applications of discourse analysis repeatedly understand discourse as a level (e.g. as opposed to a level of practices). Discourses, then, are what are found in comic strips, parliamentary debates, or within a scientific discipline, and their investigation remains confined to such separate unities. In many cases, base/superstructure models are introduced (with "discursive structures" then forming the base). According to Veyne, discourse is not a structure, and his idea of discourse breaks with any compartmentalized view of sources. One reason for this might well lie in the fact that a historian of antiquity is confronted from the very start with radically heterogeneous material, whose fragmentary character presents uncommonly greater difficulties for any generalization.

In the last chapters of his book, Veyne moves on from his core idea to its practical implications, with the figure of Foucault coming ever more strongly into view. The genealogist who insists on unpleasant origins meets with rejection from those who would like to leave the world as it is. Foucault accused a Collège de France colleague who raised objections of this kind of being a "*flic*" (p. 111). Foucault made sporadic political interventions, but in a context of militancy; he was "not convinced [...] but resolute" (p. 122).

Even if thinking should not honour a particular political practice with a truth-value, the genealogical method can bring the non-consciousness of exploitation into knowledge. When prisoners ceased to tolerate their situation and defended themselves, the Groupe d'information sur les prisons that Foucault founded in 1971 sought to bring out this "not-heard". The specific intellectual, the figure that Foucault intended to shape, was involved, and pursued "criticism in hand-to-hand combat" (to use an expression that Veyne does not himself employ). This should be understood quite literally: Foucault placed a high value on physical courage, sharing this point with the radical left movement. And yet this intellectual also acted with the traditional means of a power broker. Veyne recalls how Foucault pursued his early success under the protection of Georges Canguilhem and Jules Vuillemin, and was always concerned later to maintain contact with the daily, *Libération*. He would have liked to become a grey eminence of the literary world. He imagined – in vain, so Veyne believes – that he had a certain influence.

Foucault was friendly in personal collaboration, and warm in friendship: Veyne was a regular guest on the rue de Vaugirard when he came to Paris for his own lectures, and, being happily married, was appointed an "honorary homosexual" (p. 141). Ultimately, however, according to Veyne, Foucault lived for his books: writing offered him an experience of self-transformation. Foucault, who in his lifetime had a strong, if controlled interest in drugs, perhaps did not so much seek to break out of his own "fishbowl" as to change it (p. 141). He came out, at least in Veyne's own field of view, at the École Normale Supérieure in 1954 – cautiously at first, later fearlessly, though for a long time he remained wounded by the victimization he had experienced in his youth. He faced his death with composure, even in cold blood. He knew that he had AIDS, when very little was still known about the disease, but concealed this from his friends, and kept hanging in his office to the last the poster for a Californian gay sauna (p. 142).

Veyne, who dreams that young historians dream of writing like Foucault, ends his book with a daydream that he immediately relegates to a footnote (p. 143, note 10). He tells how on the day of Foucault's death he had a fleeting hallucination and believed for a moment that he saw the philosopher in a car on the street. This curious episode conveys a posthumous sense of helplessness over the death of his friend. It is touching, as is this whole unbalanced, personal, and impressive book.

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